

## Dartmouth College Dartmouth Digital Commons

---

Dartmouth Faculty Open Access Articles

Open Dartmouth: Faculty Open Access

---

3-1-2016

# American Secularism

Michael S. Evans  
*Dartmouth College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/facoa>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Evans, Michael S., "American Secularism" (2016). *Dartmouth Faculty Open Access Articles*. 57.  
<http://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/facoa/57>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Dartmouth: Faculty Open Access at Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dartmouth Faculty Open Access Articles by an authorized administrator of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

# American Secularism

Michael S. Evans

2016-03-01

There is a book inside this book, and that book is very good. *American Secularism* varies widely in content, purpose, and style. Parts of the book provide foundational insights that will shape Secular Studies for years to come. Parts of this book will make useful reading for undergraduate religion courses. Other parts of the book seem to be from a different book entirely, and several parts appear to be padding that brings the useful inner book to a more respectable page count. Overall, *American Secularism* is an uneven but valuable response to several challenges facing the field of Secular Studies. You should read this book. You should start with the conclusion.

But first things first: You might wonder why *American Secularism* exists, or if it offers anything new. You might assume that we already have plenty of books about American secularism. After all, people seem to have been interested in secularism for quite some time. A huge religious literature exists on how to persuade heathen, atheist, agnostic, godless, and otherwise secular people to be less of all of these things by adopting religious belief and practice (e.g. Guinness 2015). A minor subgenre of religious “quit lit” provides personal stories from people who have left religion and are exceptionally interested in telling you why (e.g. Barker 2008). And of course explicit New Atheist anti-religious screeds enjoy sustained attention from American book buyers (e.g. Hitchens 2007).

Even within sociology, you might reasonably assume that studying religion has always entailed studying secularism, and that we probably have as many studies of secularism as we do religion. If true, that would be a lot of studies. Questions about religion have long been of interest to sociology. Religion is an important social force. Some of the earliest and most influential social theory involved religion. Even the shape of sociology as a scientific discipline formed through complex and contentious maneuvering that sought to maintain religious support while gaining scientific credibility. So haven’t we always studied secularism?

No. Those assumptions are wrong. *American Secularism* is a new and important empirical contribution to the new and important field of Secular Studies. While Secular Studies has emerged from the scholarly study of religion, it offers a new focus on secularism as something to be studied in its own right, rather than as a consequence, residual, deficiency, or natural opponent of religion. For

sociologists, this means that secularism is not (only) an abstract concept or ideology, but rather (also) a descriptor of social position. To be secular is to inhabit social relationships in ways that do not entirely align with what we have traditionally called religious life.

Secular Studies is one of the most important developments in the history of the sociology of religion, and *American Secularism* is the best attempt so far to synthesize theory, survey data, and related scholarly literature into a comprehensive description of what American secularism looks like now. Because it also takes on the main challenges of Secular Studies in the process, I suspect that *American Secularism* will define the agenda of empirical Secular Studies for the near future. So it is important to read *American Secularism* not only for its specific claims and arguments, but also for how and why it goes about making them.

Probably the best way to understand *American Secularism* is to consider three major challenges that Secular Studies faces. The first is to establish that “secular” is a durable, meaningful social category that describes the beliefs and behaviors of actual ordinary people, rather than imagined people or ideas mobilized only in elite religious and political discourse (see Berlinerblau 2014). *American Secularism* tackles this challenge in the least controversial way possible, by describing and segmenting responses from surveys of the general American population. Thoughtful analysis of this data produces some basic descriptive facts: secular people exist, there are more secular people than there used to be, secular growth is noteworthy given the mechanisms of religious growth, secular people resemble religious people in many ways, and secular people vary considerably from one another. These empirical insights, some of which are surprising, form the core of the book.

A second challenge for empirical Secular Studies is to overcome the limitations of terrible, horrible, no good, very bad data. Our most useful social surveys ask dissimilar questions about religion with dissimilar assumptions, and cannot be directly compared without extensive statistical gymnastics and willful suspension of disbelief. Breaking down samples by dimensions of interest leaves us interpreting small (absolute) variations in small subsamples. Qualitative studies of secular life are rare, and mostly limited to biographical and small-n interview samples. *American Secularism* does an admirable job working with available survey data despite these limitations, and contributes a useful taxonomy that divides “secular” into four main categories based on a portable combination of belief and behavior responses. While not everyone will agree with these categories (or their names), this analytical insight will help Secular Studies scholars continue their work until better data are collected, and provide a common basis for discussion, argument, and comparison in future work.

A third challenge for Secular Studies is to establish a theoretical framework that allows for empirical comparison and exchange with findings about religious people and religious life, but does not privilege religion in that analysis. And in this effort *American Secularism* makes some especially useful contributions. Drawing

on a wide range of sociological and anthropological theories, the authors offer “cosmic belief systems” as an overarching framework for studying constellations of variable, incoherent, and mobile beliefs that people hold differently over the course of their lives. “Cosmic belief systems” describe how people make sense of their worlds through belief, and how various combinations of those beliefs at different times are rendered as “religious” or “secular.” This theoretical insight provides a central guiding question for future empirical work: under what circumstances do people hold beliefs that are seen as variably “religious” or “secular?”

If you’re not interested in Secular Studies or new developments in the sociology of religion, then your immediate interest in this book is probably driven by one question: Why is America more secular than it used to be? *American Secularism* provides the answer. Or, rather, given the limitations of snapshot data, it eliminates several possible wrong answers. Rising secularism is probably not due to changing patterns of gender, birthrate, race/ethnicity, immigration, or family. Surprise! It’s politics. Americans are non-religious to varying degrees because religion increasingly aligns with undesirable political positions, particularly on moral issues. A few interviews and biographical profiles provide some additional detail on how this can occur in secular lives, both historical and contemporary.

Before I tell you to buy *American Secularism*, let me make a harsh comment. With better editing, *American Secularism* would be a much better book. The parts that are fun to read are not vital to the book’s argument, and the parts that are vital to the book’s argument are not fun to read. Long epigraphs even at the subheading level, walls of quoted material, endless variations on “increase in x corresponds to decrease in y,” and sudden leaps in content and style distract the reader and interfere with communication. I suspect the book would be more attractive to more buyers if it were fifty pages shorter and heavily edited to read more like the excellent Summary section in each chapter. It is not, and that is frustrating. There, I said it, let’s move on.

Should you buy *American Secularism*? Short answer: yes. The parts of the book that locate contemporary secularism within broader currents of American religion, politics, and social life add value to the parts that you could otherwise get from previously published articles. But realize that you make two commitments by buying *American Secularism*. First, given the data limitations in this book, you commit to buying another book in order to see what a variety of living secular people actually say and do. I suggest *Living the Secular Life* (Zuckerman 2014) or *The Nones are Alright* (Oakes 2015) as complementary reading. Second, you commit to more work than usual as a reader or teacher to extract the most useful parts of *American Secularism* for yourself or your students. If you want my opinion, it’s worth the extra effort. Secular Studies has a long way to go, but *American Secularism* is a great place to start.

Michael S. Evans

Dartmouth College

*American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*, by Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith. New York: New York University Press, 2015. 304pp. \$27.00 (paper).

**Notice:** The final version of this review is forthcoming in *Sociological Forum* 31(2), 2016, [doi:10.1111/socf.12256](https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12256). For quoting or citing, please refer to the published version.

#### References

Barker, Dan. 2008. *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists*. Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press.

Berlinerblau, Jacques. 2014. "The Crisis in Secular Studies." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 9, 2014. Last retrieved January 15, 2016 from <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Crisis-in-Secular-Studies/148599>.

Guinness, Os. 2015. *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Hitchens, Christopher. 2007. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve.

Oakes, Kaya. 2015. *The Nones are Alright: A New Generation of Seekers, Believers, and Those In Between*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Zuckerman, Phil. 2014. *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions*. New York: Penguin Press.